

Bookshelf

Trump Didn't Kill Conservatism

By Micah Meadowcroft

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Conserving America?

By Patrick J. Deneen

(St. Augustine's, 213 pages, \$19)

President-elect Trump and Hillary Clinton make no appearances in Patrick J. Deneen's "Conserving America? Essays on Present Discontents." But judging from his book, few of the divisions revealed by the bitter election we just lived through would have surprised Mr. Deneen, a political scientist at Notre Dame. In "Conserving America?" he holds up the mirrors of Tocqueville and Burke and Aristotle to examine themes that include citizenship, patriotism and the nature of conservatism.

The result is a kind of pocket classroom -- an introductory course in 12 chapters on the state of contemporary America taught by a penetrating critic of our current form of liberal democracy. Mr. Deneen asks his readers to engage with some fundamental questions about our country: Is there a United States distinct from the liberal political project in which it was conceived? Is a post-liberal order possible? And is America as we know it even worth conserving?

There is a sickness withering the tree of liberty, in Mr. Deneen's assessment, and it arises from a catastrophic loss of historical consciousness, which he calls "the fracturing of the temporal horizon." He believes that this fracturing is inherent in liberal society: We have ceased to live in light of the past or in anticipation of the future. Fixation on the present has left us -- a loose, contractual collection of individuals -- unmoored, adrift in the now. Instead of living lives of memory and hope, we have severed the ties that bind us to our ancestors and to our posterity. He illuminates these themes with discussions of Jefferson (who saw the right of movement as essential to the enjoyment of happiness) and Tocqueville (who diagnosed an American "restlessness") but also of Hollywood films like "It's a Wonderful Life" and "American Beauty," which present different visions of American life.

The two dominant alternatives to this fixation on the present are progressivism's focus on the future and what Mr. Deneen refers to as "nostalgism," which "dons rose-tinted glasses in its high regard for a perfected past." Consider, for example, the way many Republicans talk about the Reagan era. Or even the notion of "making America great again." Such nostalgia animated much support for Mr. Trump this past year, and progressivism is easy to identify on the far left. But according to Mr. Deneen, in American politics both sides are actually liberals: classical liberals, often misnamed conservatives in the post-Cold War world, and progressive liberals. The classical liberals seek "a society of ever more perfectly liberated, autonomous individuals," particularly in economic matters. The progressive liberals seek to build a society of "ever more egalitarian members of the global 'community.'" The author believes that classical and progressive liberalism are "different sides of the same coin."

The minting and spending of that coin have bought an America where true conservatism is in short supply. Mr. Deneen argues that the aristocratic inheritance that made the liberal democratic project possible -- a respect for law and a common-law tradition, the maintenance of a vibrant civil society and dedication to free association, all secured by a foundation of religion -- has been almost entirely consumed in the process of America's rise to pre-eminence. The cultural legacy that early America inherited from an aristocratic Europe "encouraged the sense that a present generation owed debts to past generations, and as a result, generated obligations to future generations," he writes. Today, "in contrast to ancient theory, liberty is the greatest possible pursuit and satisfaction of the appetites, while government is a conventional and unnatural limitation upon our natural liberty."

In our republic, argues Mr. Deneen, a conception of men "not as parts of wholes, but as wholes apart" has dissolved the ties and relationships that are the traditional essence of society. What began in the Constitution as a mandate for government to protect rights and individual freedoms has evolved -- reflecting our desire for ever-increasing autonomy and self-definition -- into a mission to sever us from our natural contexts of place and family. Alienation and an increasingly expanding state are our destiny, Mr. Deneen fears, "unless we recover a different, older, and better definition and language of liberty." We must, argues Mr. Deneen, cultivate the virtues needed to find freedom within the limits of human nature and the natural world. That means returning self-government to local communities when possible. It may also mean, he suggests, a greater sensitivity to preserving the environment than classical liberalism typically permits.

True conservatism, especially as articulated by Burke, is driven by a "gratitude toward the past," writes Mr. Deneen, as well as by a "corresponding sense of obligation and responsibility toward the future." Receiving the inheritance of tradition, conservatism holds it in responsible stewardship and cultivates the means of transmitting it to our posterity. Mr. Deneen does believe there is an American tradition worth conserving. But to preserve it will require that tradition's re-founding. It will take a regained classical understanding of man as a political animal, born into and fulfilled in community; a rediscovery of manners and morals through education in virtue; and a renewed patriotism rooted in place. Americans, he suggests, must recover the vocation of citizenship, a calling to mutually recognize our insufficiency and take responsibility for the common good.

Mr. Deneen's is a dark and dissident vision, but not without hope. Considering the state of our fractious republic, we have need of such probing self-examination.

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